



TITLE:

<Book Reviews>Roxana Waterson  
and Kwok Kian-Woon, eds.  
Contestations of Memory in  
Southeast Asia. Singapore: NUS  
Press, 2012, vi+300p.

AUTHOR(S):

Mendoza, Meynardo P.

---

CITATION:

Mendoza, Meynardo P.. <Book Reviews>Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian-Woon, eds.  
Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012, vi+300p..  
Southeast Asian Studies 2014, 3(2): 457-460

ISSUE DATE:

2014-08

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/189565>

RIGHT:

*Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia*

ROXANA WATERSON and KWOK KIAN-WOON, eds.

Singapore: NUS Press, 2012, vi+300p.

**Is memory a cul-de-sac?**

At long last, an anthology of case studies on social memory used the frame that defined memory studies in the 80s and 90s. At that time, when memory studies became popular, the literature were mainly concerned with invented traditions and the problem of nation-building (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992; Hutton 1991), memories of the Second World War in Europe, etc. (Adorno 1989; Bourget *et al.* 1990; Olick and Robbins 1998; Climo and Cattell 2002). In this book, we can see the lineage of that earlier scholarship and how it is applied to the Southeast Asian region. Overall, the book is notable for its rich mix of talents and topics relating to the vicissitudes of how crucial historical events in the region are remembered by, *inter alia*, individuals, social groups, communities, and nations. Likewise, the book offers a wide diversity of empirical studies in an effort to elaborate the fusion between historically and geographically specific case studies with memory studies. The book is thus a significant contribution to the vast scholarship on memory.

In approaching the study of memory in Southeast Asia, the book highlights tumultuous events of the last century, thereby anchoring the book to the larger themes that have characterized memory studies: trauma and identity. Specifically, the book highlights the tensions inherent in memory studies between psychological or individual and collective approaches, between the popular and the official, between forgetting and remembering, and between dominant or suppressed narratives. The book is divided into three parts: the first offers a theoretical formulation of memory studies and tries to link this with other disciplinary approaches to the study of memory such as history, sociology, anthropology, and politics. The next two parts are empirical studies dealing with the stories of nations, destinies, and identities (Part II) and those concerned with traumatic memories of select groups and specific historical events (Part III).

Articles in Part I focus on memories of individuals and how they impact on national history and historiography. In Chapter 2 ("Remembering Kings: Archives, Resistance and Memory in Colonial and Post-colonial Burma") British colonial administrators in Burma, in dealing with the Saya San Rebellion of 1931–32, framed the event as a revolt whereby Saya San (Teacher San), a monk who claimed supernatural powers and monarchical ambitions, incited naïve (read "pre-rational") peasants to revolt as a means to justify the state's suppression of dissenters. Instead, as author Maitrii Aung-Thwin shows, the rebellion was not about rallying peasants incapable of modern political discourse and restoring an abolished monarchy to prevent Burmese unity, but rather a result of the peasants' increasing economic marginalization brought about by onerous tax policies.

Ong Keo, a member of the Nge ethnic minority and regarded as a national hero in the aftermath of the victory of the Lao revolutionary forces in 1975, is the central figure in Chapter 3 ("Shifting Visions of the Past: Ethnic Minorities and the 'Struggle for National Independence' in Laos"). Fighting the aggressors (French), imperialists (American), and their local lackeys (a right-wing monarchy), Ong Keo became a source of identification for the Nge community as they formed part of the Pathet Lao's narrative whereby "heroic provinces" became an essential element in the struggle for national liberation. With the passing of time, however, orthodox communist renditions of history have taken a back seat to "more purely nationalist sources of legitimization" (p. 84). As author Vatthana Pholsena observes, Buddhism, previously identified with the rival Royal Lao Government, has been relegated to the so-called dustbin of history in the decades following the Pathet Lao victory in 1975. However, the changing political and economic environment has altered the party-state's historical narrative. The revival of Buddhism as a potent symbol of national identity at both the popular and state levels had brought to the fore the link between Buddhism and socialism. Furthermore, Laos' economic liberalization has opened the country to the benefits of external trade as well as opportunities for its citizens beyond the avenue provided by the single party-state. As a result, the article concludes that "history as written by authoritarian states constitutes the most extreme example of a highly selective, if not distorted, representation of the past. History must be 'correct', that is, it must legitimize the leadership's rule" (p. 83).

Corollary to the preceding article, Vietnam's attempts to reconstruct an official and patriotic memory of the "American War" has not brought about the patching up of the country's ideological and geographical divide after reunification in 1975, but instead has created more ruptures. Monuments and historical narratives that extol the North Vietnamese army and the southern National Liberation Front only betray the difficulty of remembering the opposite side: the soldiers and supporters of the former South Vietnamese regime. Sharon Seah Li Lian's "Truth and Memory: Narrating Viet Nam" (Chapter 4) highlights the complex relationship between truth, memory, and history, i.e. the telling of one story occludes another, that the "already said" conceals the "never said" (p. 5). As the author concedes, the search for truth would not yield a single historical narrative. History should then be a knowledge-producing process or uncover other narratives to make possible the inclusion of other representations, even if they contradict the dominant narrative.

The theme of how memory is shaped by a changed political and economic setting is repeated in Ricardo Jose's rendition of memorial and commemorative events relating to the Second World War in the Philippines in Chapter 7, "War and Violence, History and Memory: The Philippine Experience of the Second World War." If US intentions to liberate the Philippines from Japanese occupation were seen as altruistic and necessary, by the 1970s these motives were now re-interpreted under the rubric of imperialism. The streak of nationalism and radicalism that swept the Philippines at this time, coupled with the disillusionment of Filipino veterans with getting back pay (financial remuneration for serving under the American flag) plus the payment of reparations

by Japan and the latter's increasing role in the economic recovery of the country further complicated the memories of the war. Moreover, the tensions between official and popular memories of the war were managed by the state in official commemorations of the event in order to dovetail them with its interests in foreign relations.

However, the succeeding articles that were framed by psychological approaches are not that convincing as far as utilizing the explanatory power of memory studies in understanding these watershed events are concerned. There is a tendency to overstate the topics or to infer a general narrative from very little historical information, a drawback to specialists on the topic. For example, the reader may wonder how representative are the experiences of three wives compared to the thousands of wives whose husbands suffered persecution in the aftermath of the "1965 Event" in Indonesia (Chapter 10).

Ironically, the book exhibits an inherent aversion to history. While the anthology is filled with historically momentous events, the editors juxtaposed memory studies with what may now be regarded as "traditional" history. For example, "although historians have often claimed for their craft a greater objectivity and accuracy, in contrast to memory, which is seen as unreliable and partial, it is clear that much historical writing has itself been driven by mythical meta-narratives concerning issues such as national 'destiny'" (p. 25). This makes the reader wonder whether the book may have overlooked the many developments in the field of history since the 70s and 80s which profoundly altered the way history is conceived and written. Since then, much of the younger generation of historians has discarded this positivist type of historicizing. And if the book and some scholars of memory studies took a labyrinthine and verbose path of making this point, by elaborating arduously how memories become malleable, contested, and negotiated, historians would simply retort with their dictum "there is only one past but there are many histories!" Indeed, much has changed between the time the book was published and the time when the works cited in the theoretical part and in some of the chapters were being debated.

After reading the anthology, a reader is likely to ask: is memory studies a cul-de-sac, a trap with no exit? Is scholarship on memory studies characterized only by relentless and seemingly never ending contestation? Although the book has amply demonstrated and accomplished what it has set out to do, the question of what happens now to these contested memories is left hanging. It may be said that contested memories can be a good starting point in bringing them to public attention. However, the reader may find it difficult if in the end, memories are simply posed as a problematic. For several years now, other scholars of memory studies, sometimes in collaboration with legal experts and human rights advocates, have grappled with how to address the issue of repairing historical injustices and making memory a tool for redress and reconciliation (Torpey 2003; Hayner 2001; Minow 1998). The main drawback of the book is that it comes too late, and is published at a time when the study of memory has shifted beyond questions of meaning and identity to exploring various modes of redressing injustice. It must be stressed, however, that the book

is commendable for putting together a highly interesting anthology that navigates the terrain of Southeast Asia's contentious past. The book includes many chapters that are of interest to both specialists and non-specialists alike and provides important reading material for the study of the history of modern and contemporary Southeast Asia.

Meynardo P. Mendoza

*Department of History, Ateneo de Manila University*

## References

- Adorno, Theodor. 1989. What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean? In *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, edited by G. Hartmann, pp. 114–137. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Bourget, Marie-Noelle; Wachtel, Nathan; and Valmsi, Lucette. 1990. *Between Memory and History*. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Press.
- Climo, Jacobo J.; and Cattell, Maria G., eds. 2002. *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York and Oxford: Alta Mira Press.
- Hayner, Patricia. 2001. *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Hobsbawm, Eric; and Ranger, Terence. 1992. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutton, Patrick. 2000. Recent Scholarship on Memory and History. *The History Teacher* 33(4): 533–548.
- . 1991. The Role of Memory in the Historiography of the French Revolution. *History and Theory* 30(1): 56–69.
- Minow, Martha. 1998. *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Olick, Jeffrey K.; and Robbins, Joyce. 1998. Social Memory Studies: From “Collective Memory” to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 105–140.
- Torpey, John, ed. 2003. *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

## *Space and the Production of Cultural Difference among the Akha Prior to Globalization: Channeling the Flow of Life*

DEBORAH E. TOOKER

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 344p.

The Akha were the last highland group to move to Thailand in substantial numbers. On reaching Chiang Rai, where almost all their villages are now located, they were obliged to settle in areas passed over by the groups that had preceded them. When I participated in an evaluation of an indigenous Akha NGO, the Development and Agricultural Project for Akha, in the early-1990s, their relatively late arrival and the generally remote location of their villages seemed to significantly